



## Michael Blake

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**Michael Blake**  
*University of Washington*



### "Collateral Benefit"

**Friday, February 10, 2006**  
**3:30 p.m.**  
**Mershon Center**  
**Room 120**




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Michael Blake is Associate Professor of Philosophy at the University of Washington. He holds a joint appointment with the Daniel J. Evans School of Public Affairs. He received his bachelor degree in Philosophy and Economics from the University of Toronto, and his legal training at Yale Law School. He specializes in Social and Political Philosophy, Philosophy of Law, and International Ethics.

He is currently writing a book on multicultural politics titled *The Politics of Survival: Liberalism, Tolerance, and Multiculturalism*. He has also published work on international distributive justice, international criminal adjudication, and immigration. From 1998 to 2002, he was an Assistant Professor in the Department of Philosophy at Harvard. In 2000-2002 he was a Laurance S. Rockefeller Fellow at the Center for Human Values at Princeton University. He received his Ph.D. from Stanford, his legal training from the Yale Law School.

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Political philosophers often focus upon ethical principles that apply to the decisions of those who wield government power directly. Michael Blake, professor of philosophy at University of Washington, instead considered the ethical principles that apply to the decisions of those whose relationship to government power is less direct – such agents as ordinary citizens, political parties, unions, and non-governmental organizations (NGOs). While these agents do not directly determine government policies or decisions, they can influence such policies and decisions by the ways they react.

Blake focused on a particular type of organization in a particular situation: human rights NGOs in cases of humanitarian intervention. Blake argued that the ethical principles that apply to the decisions of NGOs that provide humanitarian assistance are not the same as the ethical principles that apply to the decisions of governments.

First, Blake argued, even if humanitarian intervention is not undertaken for the right reason (namely, for the purpose of protecting human rights) an NGO may be able to legitimately support the intervention. This is because it is possible to endorse an action while condemning the character of the agent who performed it. Thus, if a government undertakes humanitarian intervention for selfish reasons, then it is possible to endorse the intervention while condemning the government.

Next, Blake considered whether an NGO can endorse humanitarian intervention that improves human rights somewhat, but not enough to justify the costs of the intervention. Blake claimed that in such cases NGOs can legitimately endorse the intervention for many reasons; for

example, if the NGO supports such intervention in this case, its view will be given greater weight by the government in the future.

Furthermore, Blake claimed, NGOs may even endorse *unjust* actions by governments, if those actions benefit human rights. This is because human rights NGOs play a particular role in international and domestic politics. Their role, Blake argued, is analogous to the role lawyers play in the legal system. Lawyers have permission to act in ways that would otherwise be unacceptable: They can ignore evidence, they need not aim for the truth, and they can use various sophistic techniques to defend their clients. Likewise, Blake said, human rights NGOs have certain role-based permissions to defend human rights in the systems of international and domestic politics.

Finally, Blake considered objections to his argument. The most significant objection holds that the moral authority of a human rights NGO is derived from its position as a moral exemplar. This authority could be undermined if a human rights NGO offers its support to cases of humanitarian intervention such as those considered above.

In response, Blake argued that human rights NGOs should value moral authority only insofar as that authority enables them to defend human rights, and to defend human rights, they must support intervention in some of the situations described above. Thus, NGOs must balance their need to build moral authority and with their mission of using moral authority to defend human rights.